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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role of assessment in educational accountability in England. A national curriculum was introduced in England and Wales in 1988, and national assessment against the national curriculum was introduced progressively from 1990. Students are assessed at the end of the key stages (at ages 7, 11, and 14) using a combination of external tests and tasks, and by teachers' own assessment judgments. At age 16, assessment is through examinations set and marked by a number of Examination Boards under the regulation of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). At the end of compulsory schooling at age 16, the General Certificate of Secondary Education Examinations are taken. Recent changes have divided the General Certificate of Education: Advanced Level examinations into A1 and A2 tests. Whether all this assessment is making schooling better in England is a question that must be considered. Scores are rising on examinations and tests, but teachers are feeling the pressure of these examinations, and teacher morale is suffering. The impact on student motivation is subtle and complex, and difficult to evaluate. Research supports the view that students are increasingly concerned with the testing system. There are two positive outcomes of the climate of over-emphasis on testing: an increased push for formative assessment for learning and improved performance on some international examinations. (Contains 21 references.) (SLD)

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Educational Accountability in England: the role of assessment

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I Introduction

The current accountability movement in education in England began over 25 years ago when the then Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan, gave a speech at Ruskin College, Oxford. In this he argued that the key features of state education - the curriculum, standards of pupil performance, and the accountability of schools - being issues of national importance should be open to public debate. The Green Paper published the following year (Education in Schools: a consultative document, DES 1977) argued for a system of assessment for pupils, schools and the education system, whilst rejecting regular testing of all pupils and publication of performance tables of schools.

In the early 1980s there was no national curriculum in the UK, although in practice the syllabuses of the school-leaving exams at 16 determined the upper secondary school curriculum. There were no primary school exams at 11 any longer, although the majority of school districts required primary schools to test pupils at 8 and 11 with standardised tests of reading and mathematics. However, in the terms that we understand now these were not accountability tests since no public use was made of the results (Gipps et al 1983). Schools used them to identify pupils who needed extra help and local school inspectors used them to support the management of schools in their district.

In 1980 the Conservative government introduced national criteria for the 16 year old school leaving examinations (the first direct intervention by a UK government in the content of the curriculum in the twentieth century) and in 1982 schools were required to publish the results of exams at 16 and 18 so that parents could make informed choices about schooling. There was also a fairly common view that schools should be more accountable to the communities they serve. By 1992 the format in which these results were to be presented was laid down so that league tables could be produced locally, and the government produced annual league tables at the national level. Thus the formal use of school results to create a market in education began (Whitty, 1989).

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The Education Reform Act of 1988 saw the introduction of a blueprint for a national assessment programme and the enshrinement in law of a national curriculum (Gipps et al 1995). The assessment framework had many forward looking and professionally supportive features, for example a strong role for teacher assessment of pupils, criterion referencing, and an emphasis on performance assessment. All three of these features had, however, been significantly eroded ten years on.

The national curriculum assessment programme began in 1991 with assessment of seven year olds in English, maths and science. By 1995 eleven year olds were also assessed on the same subjects and by 1996 14 year olds were included. At the start performance tables of school results were to be published for 7, 11 and 14 year old results annually. But tables for 7 year old results (and 14) were dropped after teacher action and a boycott of national assessment in 1991 and 1992.

The growing national and governmental interest in, and control of, schooling is not unique to the UK, of course. Nor is the focus on assessment as the key tool of accountability. Standards setting, public performance monitoring, the introduction of markets into education - all of these are common trends across a number of countries, and they all require pupil assessment data. As the level of education of the population is seen as the key resource for many countries, with the role of physical and natural resources shifting at high speed in a global economy, so governments become ever more interested in the performance of schooling. This leads to more control, direction and accountability, a trend from which the USA is certainly not exempt (Linn 2000; Linn et al 2002).

II The Current Situation in England

As explained above, a national curriculum was introduced in England and Wales in 1988. National assessment against the national curriculum was introduced progressively from 1990. Pupils are assessed at the end of the key stage (ie. at ages 7, 11 and 14) using a combination of external tests and tasks, and by teachers' own assessment judgements. At age 16 assessment is through examinations set and marked by a number of Examination Boards under the regulation of The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA).

1. Baseline Assessment (age 5)

There was a national programme of Baseline Assessment for children on entry to school.

Children had to be assessed in:

- language;

- reading;
- number;
- personal and social development

within 7 weeks of arrival at school.

There were 90 different assessment schemes accredited by QCA, rather than one imposed scheme.

Purposes:

- to help teaching
- As a baseline to measure progress

From September 2002 this requirement ceased and has been replaced by a requirement to assess attainment at the end of the Foundation Stage (age 3-5) so that there is a measure on entry to Key Stage One (5-7). These assessments will be made in any pre-school and school setting which receives government funding. The profile is a set of 13 rating scales, each of 9 levels of attainment, covering the six areas of learning in the curriculum guidance for the Foundation Stage (personal, social and emotional developments; communication, language and literature; mathematical development; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical development; creative development). (That makes 117 possible points of assessment.) It is widely felt that the Government's aim is to use this as a baseline measurement for value added at Key Stage One, despite years of advice to the contrary.

2. National Curriculum Assessment

The current arrangements for end of key stage assessment are:

Key Stage One (5-7)

Tests:	English:	reading, writing, spelling
	Mathematics	
Teacher Assessment:		English (reading and writing)
		Mathematics and science

Key Stage Two (7-11)

Tests:	English:	reading, writing, spelling and handwriting
	Mathematics:	with calculator, without calculator, mental arithmetic
	Science:	two papers

NB for each subject an extension test is available for pupils who are performing at a higher level. (To be stopped from 2003.)

Teacher Assessment:	English (reading and writing)
	Mathematics and science

Key Stage Three (11-14)

Tests:	English:	reading and writing, Shakespeare
	Mathematics:	with calculator, without calculator, mental arithmetic
	Science:	two papers

NB for each subject an extension paper is available.

Teacher Assessment:	has to be conducted in all national curriculum subjects

Optional tests are available for years 3, 4 and 5, ie. in between key stages. These are very widely used, as well as for years 7 and 8 (age 12 and 13).

Purposes

- Reporting on the attainment of individual pupils;
- monitoring national performance;
- contributing to the improvement of teaching and learning;
- contributing to monitoring the effectiveness of schools, alongside the school inspection system run by OfSTED - the Office for Standards in Education (formerly Her Majesty's Inspectorate, HMI).

From 2003 changes will be made to the tests at key stages 1, 2 and 3:

- for **Mathematics** - more questions that require pupils to decide for themselves what is the best strategy to use to solve a problem;

- for **Science** - more questions that require pupils to draw on their knowledge and experiences from scientific investigations they have carried out in the classroom.

- in **English**:
  - separate levels will be reported for reading, writing and English overall at all levels;
  - a wider range of writing skills will be assessed;
  - the focus for each question, and information provided in the mark scheme, will provide better feedback to teachers monitoring pupils' performance;

- extension tests will cease to exist from 2003 while arrangements will be developed that allow for accelerated progress through, or early entry to, statutory tests.

- New 'progress tests' for Year 7 pupils (first year of secondary school) will be made available to be used at the end of the year for those who had <u>not</u> reached the expected levels on transfer to secondary school.

- Optional tests for Years 3, 4, 5, 7 and 8 are popular with schools and will continue to be made available, and will be re-designed (on a rolling 3-4 year basis) in response to evaluation.

Marking and Reporting

The national curriculum levels are broad bands, representing on average progress over a two year period in a single level. For the purposes of reporting to parents and pupils this is the framework. The outcomes of both test and teacher assessment are expressed in terms of national curriculum levels. The dual reporting of a test level and a teacher assessment level for each pupil provides parents and pupils with two essential pieces of information: the externally validated summary of attainment and the longer-term overview of a range of performance.

Key stage 1 tests are marked by the pupils' own teachers. Key stage 2 and 3 tests are marked externally. All results are collected centrally and, as well as being reported to individual pupils and their parents, are reported nationally. The results are used in school performance tables (at key stages 2 and 4, although the Welsh Assembly has now stopped the publication of primary school results in Wales), for measuring added value, for benchmarking schools against one another, and for target-setting.

3. General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE)

These exams are taken at age 16, the end of compulsory schooling. They are available in a wide range of subjects and pupils/schools choose which any individual will take beyond the core national curriculum. They include vocational subjects, eg. engineering (Vocational GCSEs) and pupils can also take General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQ) at level one. This gave a total of 5.9 million exam entries at age 16 in 2002 (Boston 21/03/03 TES p. 23). All exams include some coursework element, and all exam scripts are marked centrally.

There are plans to increase the number of vocational GCSEs available. Plans are currently being discussed which would streamline and clarify vocational examinations in the 14-19 age group with the possible removal of the GNVQ exam.

4. General Certificate of Education: Advanced Level (GCE A level)

The academic exam for 18 year olds taken two years on from GCSE as the main qualifier for university entrance, the A' level, was changed two years ago. Curriculum 2000 was the overhaul of post-16 education introduced in September 2000. It followed ministers' complaints that the curriculum was

too narrow and inflexible, preventing students from competing with European peers.

The main changes were the 'split' into AS-level and A2 exams which each count for 50 per cent of the marks of the full A-level. Pupils are encouraged to take at least four AS exams in Year 12 and then at least three A2 exams the following year. Curriculum 2000 also introduced new vocational qualifications, "advanced extension" tests for more able students, and key skills qualifications in communication, number application and computing.

However, as the Chief Inspector, David Bell, said: "Despite the added burdens placed on schools, colleges and pupils, Curriculum 2000 has achieved much less than was intended. The range of subjects taken has not broadened significantly, and the scope of teaching within subjects has narrowed, as teachers have concentrated on course specifications."

(TES, 21.03.03, p. 3)

So, students now take major and significant exams at 16, 17 and 18. Evaluation evidence from the Inspectors (OfSTED 2003, www. Ofsted.gov.uk, Curriculum 2000: implementation) is mixed: stress levels are higher among students, they spend less time on sport, arts etc, the separate teaching and assessment of key skills has not been successful and the increase in marking has overloaded the system, which came close to collapse in summer 2002.

III Costs

The directly attributable costs of the national curriculum assessment system in England in 2000 were in the region of the £45 million per annum, excluding teacher time but including the costs of the key stage 1 audit by LEAs and of supply cover in respect of key stage 1 testing. This is in the region of 0.1% of national expenditure on education and approximately £10 per pupil per subject tested.

In 2000 QCA had a budget of £68 million (some of this would be included in the £45 million direct costs) while OfSTED had £105 million for school inspection (DfES 2001).

The cost of the examination systems at 16 and 18 is not known, since this would have to be calculated via the Examination Boards (and we would have to add the fee per individual per exam, which is paid by schools).

My colleague, Harry Torrance, has calculated that every year there are 2.35 million pupils taking in excess of 10 million separate national tests and examinations, at ages 7, 11, 14 and 16 (Torrance 2002). [This does not include baseline assessment at 5, or the - increased- number of exams at 17 and 18; or the optional tests between key stages.]

IV Impact

So, is all this assessment making our schooling any better? Are standards rising? Does the country feel that schools are more accountable?

Scores on exams and tests are rising. Since 1988 (the first year of the new General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exam) the percentage of pupils gaining the top three grades has risen by around 10% in both maths and english.

National Curriculum Test scores at primary school level did rise but are now steady.

Percentage of pupils gaining National Curriculum Assessment level 2 or above at KS1 (age 7) and level 4 or above at KS2 (age 11)

	KS1		KS2	
	English	Maths	English	Maths
1995	76	78	48	44
1996	80	80	58	54
2000	81/84	90	75	72
2001	84/86	91	75	71
2002	84/86	90	75	73

However, despite a major emphasis on literacy and numeracy the greatest increase in scores at KS2 has been in Science, with 85% of pupils gaining level 4 in 2000, an increase over five years of 24% compared to 19% for English and Maths. (Earl et al, 2001) Again, this has stabilised at 86% in 2002.

Has the testing emphasis made schools less attractive to work in? Recruitment to teacher training has been low in recent years and only 'saved' recently by giving teacher training students bursaries and loan repayments.

> 'A recent survey indicated that 12% of trainee teachers drop out of training before completion, 30% of newly qualified teachers never teach and further 18% of new recruits leave the profession within three years (TES 2/11/01, p. 1). Most explanations focus on overwork, linked to the pressure to meet targets, along with relatively low pay for an all-graduate profession.
>
> (Torrance, 2002, p. 12)

More pupils are being excluded with a significant rise - up 11% from 2000 to 2001, including a 19% rise in primary school exclusions - after several years of reductions. (BBC Education Website 23.05.02)

Now, not all of this can be laid at the door of accountability testing, but as far as teachers are concerned, unrealistic targets may lower morale. Michael Fullan and colleagues from the University of Toronto who were brought in to evaluate the national literacy and numeracy strategies concluded that national targets may no longer motivate teachers particularly if they are seen to be unrealistic (TES, 24.01.03, p. 3).

The Chief Inspector of Schools has now admitted that national targets for school improvement are making teachers feel threatened and defeatist, and turning them into cynics.

Cheating is thought to be on the increase with a Head Teacher recently jailed for 3 months for altering pupils' test papers (18.01.03).

As QCA's own evaluations show, the drive to meet targets and the pressure of league tables has a direct effect on what schools and teachers feel they can do:

> Whilst often wishing to innovate and/or encourage creativity within the curriculum, many schools are inhibited from doing so through anxiety over attaining and/or sustaining high levels of achievement. The factors most commonly identified as inhibitors are challenging targets and league tables.
> *(Key stages 1 and 2, 3 phase reports; mathematics, science and art and design reports.)*
>
> For schools and LEAs, the drive to improve standards and to meet challenging test targets is a crucial issue. For many schools at the key stage 1, 2 and 3 monitoring seminars, the nature of the curriculum is shaped by the need to improve performance in the core subjects, and particularly in English and mathematics. Some teachers report that formal assessment has reduced the amount of time available for teaching and is squeezing creativity from the curriculum.
>
> (QCA November 2002, "Report on QCA's Monitoring, Evaluating and Developing the Curriculum 2001-2002")

V Impact on Learners

The impact on student motivation is subtle and complex and therefore more difficult to evaluate. A recent major review of evidence relating to summative assessment and testing to pupils' motivation for learning (Harlen and Deakin-Crick, 2003) unpacked this issue.

> An impact on self-esteem was reported in all studies dealing with this aspect of motivation. For example, two studies showed that, after the introduction of the National Curriculum tests in England, low-

achieving pupils had lower self-esteem than higher achieving pupils. Before the tests were introduced there was no correlation between self-esteem and achievement. Although no cause and effect can be claimed here, an impact can be inferred since self-esteem is an outcome of educational experience as well as being a factor determining future learning. Put simply, one impact of the tests was the reduction in self-esteem of those pupils who did not achieve well.

....The results of tests that are 'high stakes' for individual pupils, such as the 11+ in Northern Ireland, have been found to have a particularly strong impact on those who receive low grades. However, tests that are high stakes for schools rather than for pupils (such as the national tests in England and state-mandated tests in the US) can have just as much impact. Pupils are aware of repeated practice tests and the narrowing of the curriculum. Only those confident of success enjoy the tests. In taking tests, high achievers are more persistent, use appropriate test taking strategies and have more positive self-perceptions than low achievers. Low achievers become overwhelmed by assessments and de-motivated by constant evidence of their low achievement. The effect is to increase the gap between low and high achieving pupils.

The use of repeated practice tests impresses on pupils the importance of the tests. It encourages them to adopt test-taking strategies designed to avoid effort and responsibility. Repeated practice tests are, therefore, detrimental to higher order thinking.

(Testing, Motivation and Learning, ARG 2002, p. 4)

A longitudinal study of the effects of national curriculum assessment on teachers and teaching, pupils and learning over a seven year period (PACE) found that:

SAT testing at the end of Year 2 and Year 6 appeared to have had a significant effect on perceptions, with children increasingly feeling the salience and significance of such testing. Worryingly we found evidence that children became less positive in self-assessments of their own capabilities, and became more likely to displace responsibility by attributing success or failure to innate characteristics..... As Key Stage 2 progressed the children's feelings of anxiety developed further as teachers increased the amount of routine testing.

(Pollard and Triggs, 2000, p. 285)

and warns:

.....that over-emphasis on the basics in modern education policy could unwittingly lead to a *reduction* in pupil motivation, and could thus threaten what has previously been perceived by many countries as a

particular strength of English primary education. Indeed, a significant proportion of pupils seem to have became instrumentally concerned with 'playing the system', with superficial learning and trying to avoid boredom. Whilst many children may 'perform' despite their lack of intrinsic engagement, our research suggests that we should be particularly concerned about the attitudes and lifelong learning skills of pupils.

(Pollard and Triggs, 2000, p. 297)

Even Prince Charles has joined in:

> Heavier testing at school has led to less time for learning and necessitated a teaching style he described as "defensive", the Prince of Wales wrote in the Royal Society of Literature magazine.
>
> Fashionable trends in education risk producing a generation of "culturally disinherited young people" and Prince Charles looks to the Germans, French and Russians who embrace their literary heritage as he believes we ought to.
>
> (BBC News, Talking Point, 03.02.03)

VI What can be learnt from the English Experience?

Well, we have been here before. In the late 19th century England had a curriculum and assessment system: The Revised Code and Payment by Results. This system, which stifled elementary education and profoundly affected the role of HMI (turning them from advisers to examiners) actually collapsed under its own administrative weight. Here is an extract from a book by Edmond Holmes, Chief Inspector for Elementary Schools, who published in 1911 a reflection on education over the previous 50 years, including Payment by Results:

> Of the evils that are inherent in the examination system as such - of its tendency to arrest growth, to deaden life, to paralyse the higher faculties, to externalise what is inward, to materialise what is spiritual, to involve education in an atmosphere to unreality and self-deception - I have already spoken at some length. In the days of payment by results various circumstances conspired to raise those evil tendencies to the highest imaginable "power". When inspectors ceased to examine (in the stricter sense of the word) they realised what infinite mischief the yearly examination had done....
>
> Not a thought was given, except in a small minority of the schools, to the real training of the child, to the fostering of his mental (and other) growth. To get him through the yearly examination by hook or by crook was the one concern of the teacher.
>
> (Holmes, 1911, pp. 108-109)

What about American history? John Nisbet (2000), the first President of BERA, reminds us that the publication of results for individual schools in the form of league tables began in Boston in 1845, only to be abandoned as a 'waste of time' two years later.

> The State of Massachusetts set up a Board of Education in 1837 and appointed Horace Mann as its first Secretary. ...he had annoyed the Boston school-teachers by criticising the standard of education in their schools. The Boston School Committee set about showing that Boston did not need supervision by the State authority. They decided to do this in 1845 by a systematic survey of schools using printed tests in a range of subjects: Grammar, Definitions, History, Natural Philosophy (or general science), Astronomy, Rhetoric, Writing and Arithmetic. Sampling was used to select about 500 scholars in the 13-14 age-range, and each test lasted one hour, with questions drawn from the textbooks in use in the schools.
>
> ...Rules were laid down for scoring the tests which gave the scholars the benefit of doubt. Nevertheless, the results according to the Board's report, were 'discouraging', averaging between 24 and 39%:
>
> > 'A large proportion of... boys and girls of fourteen or fifteen years of age... cannot write without such errors in grammar, in spelling and in punctuation, as we should blush to see in a letter from a son or daughter of their age.' (quoted in Travers, 1983, p. 91)

Noting that some schools had better results than others, the Board published a 'table of rank' for individual schools. The school which had the largest proportion of non-European immigrants was severely criticised, on the grounds that the master in charge lacked faith in the children's ability to learn and so taught them nothing. However, the commissioners of 150 years ago had the sense to observe:

> 'We do not recommend the table of rank... as affording a precise estimate of the merits of the schools... Even if it were a perfect demonstration... still we would not have it considered as an absolute test of the merits of the schools... Let us look to the cultivation of religious sense, the supremacy of conscience, the duty of self-culture, the love of knowledge, the respect for order... before we say which school is first or which is last.' (quoted in Travers, 1983, pp. 91-2)

The tests were repeated in 1846, but not in 1847. The Committee's 1849 Report gives the reason: it was because

> 'no use had been made of the results given in 1845 and 1846, and the further giving of tests was clearly a waste of time'
>
> (Nisbet, 2000)

VII Conclusion

What we are seeing - certainly in England and probably across the English speaking world - is a shift from a situation in which the teachers' major responsibility is to their pupils to one in which their major responsibility is to performance and accountability measures. The vastly increased central direction and control from this Labour Government has been met with mixed reactions: admiration from many onlookers and pragmatists; astonishment and dismay by the many teachers who had voted them in. There would however be little disagreement that the raft of targets, performance measures, strategies and the increased emphasis on testing and examination constitutes very much stronger control and external accountability, with a parallel reduction in teachers' professionalism.

Does/did the education system deserve this? If the 'secret garden of the curriculum' had been opened up earlier than 1988 could the worst of this current testing-and-targets regime have been avoided? Would the English education system have been seen as more accountable and productive when the national (and international) moves to measure, control and improve education swept in? Who knows? If there is a global trend most self-respecting administrations want to be part of it. Certainly, as Wolf argues there is an increasing pre-occupation among Governments with monitoring and regulating the education process on which they spend so much money, and which concerns so many of their citizens. As politicians become more concerned to control education they turn increasingly to assessment to monitor, control and change the education system, strong in the belief that educational performance translates directly into economic growth (Wolf, 2002).

Are there any positive things to report from England in this climate of over-emphasis on accountability testing? Well, there are two as it happens. First, the widespread push for, and uptake of, Assessment for Learning can be seen, I would argue, as a professional response to an over-structured testing regime which has led to a desire to use assessment in the classroom to enhance learning. Many of us in the assessment domain have been encouraging teachers to go down this route (Gipps 1994; Gipps 2002) and stop agonising about national curriculum assessment about which they can do little, and the response has been very encouraging. The review by Black and Wiliam (1998) did help, by showing that, done appropriately, formative assessment with qualitative feedback does improve performance, and what is more the gains are greater for the lower performing pupils. Faced with high quality research evidence and teachers' engagement with the process, the DfES and OfSTED have joined the bandwagon and are encouraging it too.

The second is our performance in PISA - the 'newest' of the international performance indicators which emphasises the use of knowledge. Recent

assessments of 15 year olds' reading, scientific and mathematical literacy show that English youngsters score in the top group: 4th on Science, 7th on reading and 8th in maths (out of 32 countries). Only Korea scored higher in all three areas, while the English out-performed traditional rivals such as France and Germany (also the US) (OECD, 2001). These assessments emphasise skills and the use of knowledge in real-world scenarios rather than knowledge content per se. So, the good news is that our youngsters have the ability to use higher order skills. Is this because of, or despite, regular testing? Again, the PISA studies show that our pupils have the most pressure on them and this has contributed a little to higher standards, but that other factors such as classroom climate and use of resources have a greater effect. So, one could argue the effects of accountability testing in both ways: that our youngsters performed well in PISA because of regular testing (because the underlying basic skills were there) or despite it.

What we can say is that there are few in the education profession, or on the receiving end of it (as students or parents) who do not believe there is too much accountability testing. The Government shows no inclination to reduce it. What this will take is probably another global trend. The question is, how long will we have to wait for this one?

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